

Kindness: A Pathway to a Satisfying Life

Recently my wife learned that 103 students enrolled at her university are wards of the state—they have no parents or home. As she shared her story, she choked up and so did I.

Life is hard. And even for those who are materially comfortable, there are problematical circumstances and challenges to overcome. No one is spared the pain of losing loved ones.

As we go about our day, we encounter strangers. Some of those strangers would benefit by our kindness—perhaps just a smile or a kind word. Can we not all increase our kindness quotient?

[“Be kind, for everyone you meet is fighting a hard battle,”](#) is a credo to live by.

[Acclaimed writer George Saunders](#) reflected that what he “regret[s] most in [his] life are *failures of kindness*.”

In a [convocation speech](#) delivered at Syracuse University, Saunders identifies three mindsets that stop us from being kinder. He calls them “built-in confusions”:

Each of us is born with a series of built-in confusions that are probably somehow Darwinian. These are: (1) we’re central to the universe (that is, our personal story is the main and most interesting story, the only story, really); (2) we’re separate from the universe (there’s US and then, out there, all that other junk – dogs and swing-sets, and the State of Nebraska and low-hanging clouds and, you know, other people), and (3) we’re permanent (death is real, o.k., sure – for you, but not for me).

Here is the curious thing about these mindsets: We don’t really believe them. But, we act as though they are true.

Saunders observes:

We don't really believe these things – intellectually we know better – but we believe them viscerally, and live by them, and they cause us to prioritize our own needs over the needs of others, even though what we really want, in our hearts, is to be less selfish, more aware of what's actually happening in the present moment, more open, and more loving.

“How might we,” Saunders asks, “become more loving, more open, less selfish, more present, less delusional...?”

Saunders advises us to “be a good and proactive and even somewhat desperate patient on [our] own behalf – seek out the most efficacious anti-selfishness medicines, energetically, for the rest of [our] life.”

Saunders is not advising against personal ambition, but he asks us to “err in the direction of kindness.” How might we do that? Saunders advises, “Avoid the things that would reduce you and make you trivial.” Instead, turn towards the “luminous part of [yourself].”

Luminous part? Saunders is speaking of the part of us “that exists beyond personality.” He adds, “Your soul, if you will – is as bright and shining as any that has ever been. Bright as Shakespeare’s, bright as Gandhi’s, bright as Mother Teresa’s.”

So, the process of being kinder is a process of subtraction: “Clear away everything that keeps you separate from this secret luminous place. Believe it exists, come to know it better, nurture it, share its fruits tirelessly.”

We think we are separate from the universe and live our lives through our personal story of “me.” These confusions keep us from our “luminous place” and block the flow of kindness.

Life is a contact sport; we take our lumps and bumps. From the lens of separation, we ask, *Why is this happening? Why did they do this to me?* From the soul lens we see these lumps and bumps very differently. In the smallest everyday encounters,

we can remember and strengthen our true nature.

I had a question as I was setting up my health care flexible spending account. Erin, the service representative at the call center, was unable to answer my question, so she faked it. She gave me an answer that was clearly wrong. Perhaps she was new to the job; in any case, her work was a “hard battle.”

There have been similar situations in which my irritation may have been heard in my voice. That day I made a different choice. With sincere empathy I said, “Erin, it must be difficult having to answer questions about many plans with many rules.” The stress went out of her voice as we started fresh and solved the issue.

I’m sure you can share your own example of a time you choose kindness instead of taking things personally. Every day presents opportunities to practice kindness as we let go of our personal sense of importance.

Perhaps, you’re shopping in the supermarket, very much lost in the concerns of your day. Standing in the check-out line, complaining thoughts arise as you observe how slowly the cashier is moving. You choose not to grab hold of those thoughts. Instead, you act contrary to your personal sense of importance. You smile at the cashier and sincerely ask how her day has been. For a moment her burden seems to lift as she shares how busy the lines have been.

In that moment, you and the cashier share your common humanity; the day is a bit brighter for both of you.

Through brief encounters we may discover we’re not really separate at all. We impact the arc of the day of others, as they impact ours. Marcus Aurelius advised in his [*Meditations*](#),

Keep reminding yourself of the way things are connected, of their relatedness. All things are implicated in one another and in sympathy with each other. This event is the consequence of some other one. Things push and pull on each other, and breathe together, and are one.

Perhaps today you didn't climb as high on the ladder of success as you had planned. Saunders would say so *what*, being kind is job 1:

"Succeeding," whatever that might mean to you, is hard, and the need to do so constantly renews itself (success is like a mountain that keeps growing ahead of you as you hike it), and there's the very real danger that "succeeding" will take up your whole life, while the big questions go untended.

There is no better time to begin to be kinder than this moment. Now is the only time to make a different choice. The words of Marcus Aurelius ring true: "Each of us lives only now, this brief instant. The rest has been lived already or is impossible to see."

When we stop being self-centered, we might discover, as Aurelius puts it, "how few things you have to do to live a satisfying and reverent life."

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